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CIA reassures leaders of Southern Baptist board



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Central Intelligence Agency administrators say they will take corrective action if anyone presents hard evidence that CIA agents are posing as missionaries or involving missionaries in intelligence-gathering work.

CIA Director William Casey met last week with officials of the Richmond-based Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board to discuss the agency's position on missionary involvement. The board is the largest evangelical missionary organization in the world.

Casey affirmed to the board's president, Dr. R. Keith Parks, and its executive vice president, Dr. William R. O'Brien, the CIA's position that to involve missionaries in intelligence activities violates the First Amendment regarding separation of church and state.

An interested party to the discussions is Vice President George Bush, who was CIA director for 18 months during the Ford administration. He is expected to deal with the issue during a New Orleans news conference slated for today, two days before the opening of the annual Southern Baptist Convention.

During the 30-minute meeting with Casey and the CIA director of external affairs, William Doswell, Dr. Parks said he told them that any CIA use of missionaries "jeopardizes not only the work of missionaries, but has the potential of putting them in a dangerous situation and even jeopardizes their lives as well as their being able to stay and work in various countries."

Dr. Parks said Doswell told him that if anyone could present hard evidence that missionaries are being used as agents or that agents were posing as missionaries, the agency would take action.

In a phone conversation with Baptist Press, Doswell's deputy, Lavon Strong, supported Doswell's statement and added that evidence could be presented to Casey or the president's intelligence oversight board, an independent group set up to watch for misbehavior in intelligence activities.

Dr. Parks requested the meeting because of the board's concern over "persistant rumors of contact" by CIA agents with missionaries. Dr. Parks said the mission board has no knowledge of any Southern Baptist missionary involved in CIA

activity, but the concern over the image of all evangelical missionaries, including those in other denominations, prompted the request for the meeting.

Since late 1975 when President Ford acknowledged that the CIA had used missionaries in the past and may again, the Foreign Mission Board has urged legislation to prohibit missionary involvement in intelligence activities.